


Should I Tell My Child That He Is Autistic?

When I was doing the walk at Nova Southeastern University for Autism Speaks, in support of research for autism, an issue came up. While we were walking, one of the other elementary-aged youngsters told his younger friend that he was autistic. When the younger boy asked his mother if he was autistic, his mom froze.

It occurred to me as a professional that this is yet another tough decision a parent of autistic, as well as other challenged children, have to face. It is no secret that parenting is arguably one of the most



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difficult jobs to do well. However, parenting children with special needs makes parenting a typical child a piece of cake.

This situation got me to thinking. What is the answer to that question? Surely we all have to make decisions about many things such as the birds-and-bees discussion, when to let children see PG13 movies or R-rated movies, when to let them sleep over a friend's house, and when to intervene if we don't like the friends with whom our children are associating. The list can go on and on. While I'm not a psychologist or a family counselor, I thought this subject should be discussed from the perspective of a professional who works with these families. As a speech language pathologist, my opinions may be nothing more than food for thought. If you are contemplating this very issue, it is best that you seek the advice of a psychologist, family physician, or family counselor.

All of us have issues. There isn't a child or adult who doesn't have areas that test our strengths and weaknesses. It is the fear of the unknown that causes the greatest anxiety. If I am aware of my difficulties I may be able to confront them, be prepared to deal with them and notice that I am not alone. It may also be apparent that when we define who we are we will be able to recognize our strengths.

One of my middle-school students came into our session upset, flustered and overwhelmed. During physical education class they were playing basketball. He is an unusually tall young man. Many of his classmates assumed he would be able to play well. As with many autistic people, he is not well coordinated and had great trouble playing to the dismay of his teammates. When questioned about what had happened at school to make him upset he kept uttering, "the kids are so artistic. I hate artistic kids." I felt that this was an area that needed to be addressed by the parents, not myself. I discussed the episode with his father and made some recommendations on how to problem solve this dilemma. I am still unsure about how it ended up being dealt with at home. Did these parents ever discuss with their son what it means to be autistic?

When children reach a certain age, and that age could vary with each child, if autism could be explained, perhaps they could understand themselves better and then help others to understand them. The sensory issues, the communication issues, the motor issues, coping, and the social issues could be explained in terms that they could comprehend step-by-step. Perhaps after identifying these areas some of them may be worked on and improved. Never forget to discuss areas of strength as well. All of us want to feel we fit in and we can with more knowledge about ourselves and others.